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## Education

# Federal cuts bring confusion, uncertainty to Alaska's Head Start programs

By Emily Goodykoontz  
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Maleia Reynolds, 4, talks with staff member Suphapich Saevana in a pre-kindergarten classroom at Kids' Corp, which provides Head Start programs in Anchorage, on April 8, 2025. (Marc Lester / ADN)


Several Alaska Head Start programs were thrust into confusion and uncertainty this month when a federal regional office was abruptly shuttered as part of sweeping layoffs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services by the Trump administration.

The Head Start Region 10 Office in Seattle oversaw more than 70 federally funded Head Start programs across Alaska, Washington, Oregon and Idaho. At least five of the 10 Head Start regional offices around the U.S. were closed April 1, according to the National Head Start Association.


Head Start is a national funding program for preschool, early childhood education and health care access. In Alaska, there are 17 Head Start programs operated by nonprofits and tribal organizations. The programs serve some of lowest-income families and most vulnerable children in the state.

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Local Head Start leaders say the Seattle office provided critical support and oversight to four of the Alaska programs.

With its sudden closure, “there’s just been some panic and a lot of uncertainty and instability with regards to a lack of a transparent plan,” said Katrina Ahlfield, director of Anchorage-based Head Start program Kids’ Corps Inc.

The four programs that worked closely with the shuttered office currently serve about 1,076 children between Anchorage, Fairbanks, the Matanuska-Susitna region and around 20 rural communities, and receive about \$23.4 million annually in federal funds, according to Mark Lackey, executive director of the Mat-Su-area Head Start, CCS Early Learning in Wasilla.

Alaska Head Start programs were given no warning about the Seattle office’s closure, Lackey said. Instead, they were suddenly left with no point of contact for emergencies or for questions about grants and compliance.

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“Maybe the worst part of it all is that nobody knows anything. There is no plan that we know of. I basically am operating now without any federal oversight or support,” Lackey said.

Alaska’s other 13 Head Start programs are overseen by a federal office serving American Indian and Alaska Native programs, which remains intact, Lackey said.



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Still, the other programs worry that the closures, impacting Head Start programs in 23 states, will create an untenable workload for the remaining regional offices. They fear it could cause delays for grant funding disbursements, or that future grant applications could end up denied.

“If you had any immediate needs or wanted to talk through your unique program needs, those were the people that you could rely on,” Ahlfield said.

## **‘Immediate and serious concerns’**

In [an April 3 letter](#), the Alaska Head Start Association urged Alaska’s congressional delegation — U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan, and U.S. Rep. Nick Begich III — to “take immediate action” and to demand reversal of the regional office closures by Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

The closure “has created immediate and serious concerns about the continued success and sustainability of Head Start services across our region,” Alaska Head Start Association President Deborah Trowbridge said in the letter.

“The loss of this office’s expertise and support will disrupt services in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, severely impacting the children and families who

rely on these programs,” Trowbridge said in the letter.

All three delegation members said they’ve made inquiries with Health and Human Services since hearing of the concerns.



Assistant teacher Annita Kuo works with students in a pre-kindergarten classroom at Kids’ Corp. (Marc Lester / ADN)

In a statement Monday, Murkowski said she is “deeply troubled” by the closure of the regional office.

She has “spoken directly with Secretary Kennedy to stress how detrimental regional closures would be for our state,” Murkowski said. “My staff and I have worked to connect with contacts within the department to ensure that Alaska Head Start can meet application deadlines and reporting requirements.”

In a statement Friday, Amanda Coyne, spokesperson for Sullivan's office, said that the senator supports Head Start and "agrees that Head Start providers need a reliable contact to address questions and concerns, and provide timely assistance given our state's unique geographic and cultural challenges."

Sullivan and his team asked Kennedy's office for a contact that Alaska providers can use during the reorganization of the Department of Health and Human Services, and that contact has been shared, Coyne said.

"Senator Sullivan's staff are in daily discussions with HHS officials regarding Alaska-specific concerns about this HHS reorganization and to ensure that the Secretary is well informed about the flexibility and support Alaska needs to address our unique health care and social service challenges," Coyne said.

Similarly, a spokesperson for Begich said Tuesday that his team had contacted the department for additional guidance related to the issues raised by the Alaska association. Begich said in a statement that "it is important that this program is able to continue to remain compliant with policy and deliver these services to Alaskan families."

Local Head Start directors last week received a mass email from federal Head Start leadership saying that they should submit questions or requests through the usual software system for correspondence with federal employees, Ahlfield with Kids' Corps said.

That contact is a generic email address. The list of six people that they once could contact at the Seattle office is gone from the system, Lackey said.

It's been a week since the office closed, and Alaska directors still don't know who will be managing their grants or who to turn to for help.

The closure came just as Lackey prepares to submit his annual grant re-approval application by a May 1 deadline. Normally, he'd be in regular contact with the regional office, asking questions and working through the process with federal employees.

The Seattle employees knew his program and understood some of the unique challenges Head Starts in Alaska often face, he said.

“When I do submit this grant that I haven’t discussed with anybody — any federal folks — I have zero idea if somebody is going to get it, who that person is going to be, what part of the country they’re in,” Lackey said. “They’re going to know nothing about my program, probably nothing about Alaska. And so I’m pretty scared that that grant application will not get approved. And if it does get approved, will it be in time?”

## **A ‘whole child, whole family approach’**

Kayse Hinrichsen is the Head Start director at RurAL CAP, which provides 21 early childhood and preschool programs in rural communities. She’s worried about losing the regional office staff’s experience with Alaska, local cultures and the challenges faced in remote areas — and what that loss might mean for the future of RurAL CAP’s programs.

“We are very concerned that we’re going to lose that level of support and understanding moving forward,” Hinrichsen said. “And really it’s all that support that helps us maintain high-quality programs, and in the long run, continues that federal money coming into Alaska to provide services.”

Head Start takes a “whole child, whole family approach,” she said.

That means they go beyond preschool services in the classroom, making sure kids get health exams. They support families by connecting them to resources, like if they are experiencing food insecurity, or if a parent needs to go back to school and get a GED, Hinrichsen said.

Ahlfield, a director at Kids’ Corps for about two years, and said there is a “huge learning curve” to running a Head Start program and following the rigorous performance standards. The grantee specialists at the Seattle office essentially acted as a liaison between Head Start programs and the federal office in D.C. while providing compliance oversight.

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Ahlfield said she understands the administration’s desire to restructure or reimagine what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services looks like, but that she has major concerns about whether it can effectively support Head Start programs going forward.

Ahlfield said Kids' Corps hasn't yet received its grant disbursement, which is due this month, and she's worried. The program can only operate for about one month on savings, she said.

To qualify for Head Start's low or no-cost programs, families must be living at or below federal poverty guidelines, receiving food stamps or be homeless, she said.

On Tuesday, Ahlfield visited a pre-K classroom at one of Kids' Corps locations in Anchorage. At two low tables, 12 children ages 3 to 5 were working with their teachers to color, cut and glue together paper bears.

Many of the children in the class have been with the program since infancy. Some of their mothers had received prenatal support through Head Start before they were born, according to Ahlfield. Those children who have been with Kids' Corps the longest are already reading, she said.

"These programs are vital," she said.

*Daily News reporter Iris Samuels contributed.*

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### **Emily Goodykoontz**

Emily Goodykoontz was an ADN reporter from 2020 to April 2025 covering Anchorage local government and general assignments. She previously covered breaking news at The Oregonian in Portland before joining the Daily News.

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